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A century ago a booming little city at the mouth of the Fox River intently watched the long agony of the Civil War drag to its fiery conclusion. Although Green Bay was prosperous beyond anything it had previously known, the area was on the verge of a colorful era of prosperity beyond even the wildest dreams of visionary pioneer promoters.

The key to the coming era was lumber, and virtually everybody in Green Bay was in some manner up to his ears in lumber. The city's real stake in the industry, however, was shingles.

For nine years, ever since the shaved shingle industry had been launched in Brown County by recently arrived Belgian immigrants about 1856, the business had been growing. By 1865 it was only beginning to hit stride. It would continue to grow until by 1875 Green Bay was the largest shingle market in the world and the lowly shingle widely referred to as "Green Bay Legal Tender."

**Staggering Volume**

The volume of that trade was staggering. An Advocate survey in December, 1866, was to reveal that more than 25 billion —repeat, billion — shingles had poured through the city in the preceding 11 months. A decade later the figure had tripled.

By the end of 1866 there were at least 20 shingle mills in and immediately adjacent to Green Bay, plus dozens more running as auxiliaries to sawmills along the bay shore, most of whose output cleared through this port. In addition, millions were made by hand throughout the surrounding farm area.

Initially, all shingles had been shaved by hand, from split blocks or bolts, shaved or "reaved" into shape by twin handled draw knives. Shaving shingles was a common winter occupation of most farmers, whose isolated homes had rooms exclusively devoted to the job.

Whole families, from children to grandparents, took part in the operation, some members staying the entire day on benches in these rooms, laboriously whittling bolts into finished shingles. It was not uncommon for them to start work at 4 a.m. and to keep at it until midnight.

**Hard Job**

Even for a home operation, shaving shingles was a hard job. Older members of the group cut the bolts in the woods and hauled them to the house. Here the bolts had to be split, then shaved into the proper size, after which they were packed in bundles of 1,000, stacked in sleighs and eventually taken to market.

Long before 1861 Green Bay shaved shingles had achieved a high reputation for quality and were in great demand. Since the hand manufacturing method couldn't keep up with it, small shingle mills inevitably sprang up in competition.

The mill process wasn't very dependable at first and there was a great deal of waste. By the end of the Civil War, however, machines had been perfected to chop out shingles that closely matched the shaved article.

**100,000 a Day**

Some of these mills could produce up to 100,000 a day, although that volume was rarely achieved. T. R. Willard's mill on the East River had one machine that in 1866 turned out 353,250 shingles in a week. Such volume eventually crowded the hand shaved shingles out of the market.

Shingles finished by hand were packed into standard bundles and stacked on a wagon or sleigh. When a full load had been accumulated and weather and road conditions permitted, the farmer took off for town.

Since everybody else had the same idea, the loads converged on the city in long "shingle trains" that frequently stretched the full length of Main Street and far out into the country as far as the eye could see. Sometimes there were as many as 100 ox or cow-drawn vehicles in the street at once with more coming.

The Green Bay shingle market was an informal open air exchange at the corner of Main and Washington. Here the buyers—local men working on commission from Chicago and eastern brokers — met the teams and bid against each other for every load.

**Had Its System**

The resultant uproar was bedlam to the uninitiated but it had its own system, just as a tobacco auction today. As sales were made the loads proceeded to specified unloading areas.

Since the round trip for the farmer often covered 20 miles, most of it over wretched roads, he usually made a two-day affair of it, staying overnight, loading up with needed supplies in the morning and then heading home.

Cargoes were usually held here for summer shipment by water, and at the height of the industry it often took half the summer to clear the docks of accumulated shingle piles. Some went out by rail, the North Western on occasion loading as many as 750,000 shingles into box cars in a single day. Meanwhile, the accumulated stockpiles represented a tremendous fire hazard.

With the assault on standing pine, it wasn't long before the supply of timber was exhausted. Green Bay's short reign as shingle capital ended when the tide of the lumber industry moved west, shingle mills were dismantled and moved or simply burned down. By 1880 the glory days were over.

**Renewed Demand**

In 1889, however, there was a renewed demand for shaved shingles, and this time the Belgian farmers on the Door Peninsula had the market to themselves. In 1889 the number of shingles hauled into Green Bay and sold totaled 5.5 million, only a trickle by former standards but enough to make it profitable even at prices half what they once had been.

Many farmers actually found it more profitable to make shingles of their remaining timber stands than to cultivate their fields, even though it meant going as far as ten miles for bolts. Even stumpage that had not been cleared was uprooted for more shingle stock.

Initially, the shingles were made of pine but as that dwindled it was discovered that cedar was just as good if not better. The later boom was in cedar "shakes."

**No Puny Wafer**

The old 1865-1890 shingle differed greatly from the puny wooden wafer of today. It was a wedge-shaped slab of 16 to 18 inches long, six inches wide and as much as four inches thick at the butt end.

Old barns still covered with these "shakes" are as weatherproof on top today as they were when built years ago. There aren't many left, though. People are now buying entire buildings just to get the shingles.

Among the prominent local buyers in the 1960s, '70s and early '80s were Anton Klaus, Lewis Day, Earle and Case, Lambert Nau, Sherwood and Holmes, Marshall & Bros., Strong and Clark, F. Hurlbut and George Schauer. Day was the leading dealer in 1865 with a total of 36 million forwarded, but Klaus passed him in '66 en route to a brief but spectacular career as the biggest shingle operator in the United States.

Klaus built a dock at Bay Settlement to which farmers who couldn't make the long trip into Green Bay brought their loads. During the winter he sent them into town over the ice, one remarkable load thus transported in the winter of 1865-66 totaling 40,000 shingles on two extra-large sleighs pulled by a single team.

**Load Size Varied**

An average load was between 5,000 and 6,000 shingles. On occasion, however, loads might run up to 15,000.

Louis Van Dycke, founder of Dyckesville about 1856, wasn't strictly a Green Bay operator but he had a good thing going out there. In addition to running a profitable general store, tavern and grist mill, he built a dock, sawmill and a shingle mill.

He also bought shaved shingles from as far away as Casco. Between the opening of 1866 navigation and July, Van Dycke forwarded 5,100,000 shingles, of which 1,300,000 were hand made.

In the late 1860s prices on the Chicago market hovered between $4.50 and $5 a thousand. At $4.50 in Chicago, the going price at Washington and Walnut Streets was $3.75.